

Sunday 20 September 2020, a service for use at home; Haddington West Church, Garvald and Morham

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

Ps.131: "*My heart is not proud, LORD, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quietened myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content.*

Israel, put your hope in the LORD both now and for evermore."

Collect: Almighty God, you created the heaven and the earth, and made us in your image. Teach us to discern your hand in all your works and to serve you with reverence and thanksgiving; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
AMEN

1153 As one in Christ the Lord

1 As one in Christ the Lord

 His glories here proclaim,
 exalt His holy word,
 His everlasting name:
 let love and praise
 unite our powers
 for we are Christ's
 and Christ is ours.

2 On Him our hope is set,
 whose cross is strong to save;
nor shall our hearts forget
 that empty Easter grave:
with Him we rise,
 our sins forgiven,
to share with Him
 the life of heaven.

3 Be ours to use aright
 the gifts of thought and mind,
in scripture take delight,
 and God's approval find:
till through the Spirit
 and the word
there stands revealed
 the living Lord.

4 Whom Jesus calls He sends,
 to make His mercies known:
ambassadors and friends,
 the heralds of His throne.
His word of truth

and life declare:
with all the world
His gospel share.

- 5 To follow Christ our aim,
 in Him to stand complete,
that all may hear His name
 and bow before His feet:
the faith to keep,
 the race to run,
and hear at last
 the Lord's 'Well done!'

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Jonah 1,4-16

"Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, 'How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.'

Then the sailors said to each other, 'Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.' They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, 'Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?'

He answered, 'I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' This terrified them and they asked, 'What have you done?' (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, 'What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?' 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea,' he replied, 'and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.'

Instead the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried out to the LORD, 'Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased.' Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him."

Dear friends

The picture book that is the book of Jonah in the Bible offers us views of God's dealings with us, of the meaning and significance that Jesus Christ has for us. The terms I used in last Sunday's sermon which started this series were that of the 'God-factor' in our world and that of the 'human factor' and their relationship. Let us, then, continue to look at it because there is little that is more important than that we have a true account of these matters.

What we encounter in Jonah is man's displeasure at God's grace. It is offensive to him, because grace gives what is not deserved and does not give what is deserved, it rewards the undeserving. The Assyrians in Nineveh ought not to be given the chance to repent and mend their ways, they should get what they deserve. So strong is the sense of being offended by the grace of God that Jonah not only refuses to have a hand in it but actively seeks to sabotage it by going (fleeing from God) in the opposite direction. His disgust at grace drives him to go against the will of God, persuaded that that is the more righteous course. ("If God does not know how to be just, I do!") This is man making sure that God does not have His way!

It should not surprise us that we come across this in the NT also, and do so frequently. Think of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who mutter against Jesus as he welcomes sinners and eats with them. What do they object to but grace? And think of the parable Jesus then tells them, of the prodigal son: the part of the older brother who objects so strongly to the gracious welcome his brother receives at the hands of the father, his brother whom he would rather not have to acknowledge at all. ["It is not right! If it is, why should it have been right for me to stay all this time?!", see Lk.15,28-30!] Or think of the parable of the vineyard workers where Jesus describes the displeasure and envy of workers who when they see that the landowner who hired them gives the same wage to those who worked fewer hours than them, are outraged at the perceived unfairness of it. It is not right, they say, they object to grace. And there is much more.

But why this objection to grace? Why is it found to be so offensive? We ask this not as if we were an audience looking on to whatever is playing on stage. We are not mere on-lookers, we encounter this sense of the offensiveness of grace in ourselves. We are familiar with it even if we do not recognise it immediately as such. You see, this objection to grace is not, as it may seem in the book of Jonah, a case merely of being fuelled by a desire for revenge. When Jonah thinks that the course of grace is wrong for Nineveh, then he also thinks it's wrong for him; whatever he thinks determines what is right for Nineveh, is the same as what determines what is right for him. "They must get what they deserve, because I do too/because that is just." And does not our heart reason in the same way?

And this is why so often the preacher of grace has a far harder time than the preacher of works. Because if grace is the way, then all my works, including the best (especially the best!) have zero merit! But if all my works have zero merit, I can no longer pride myself on being good and righteous in myself by virtue of my virtues, and I have no longer a basis on which to expect God's favour because I deserve it, and no longer am I blind about what my works *do* deserve. And so grace turns out to be an enemy to pride and self-righteousness. Indeed, it gives them no quarter in the heart, and this is its offensiveness. Grace kills pride and it destroys self-righteousness, it does to them what only a good weed-killer does to weed.

It is no wonder that pride and self-righteousness will attempt to flee from grace. And the person so disposed will do so until grace comes home. And the thing about the grace of God coming home is that until it does pride and self-righteousness will do their work: prevent repentance, keep a lid on the sweet fruit of gracious, forgiving, reconciling, generous, costly love which "keeps no record of wrong ... always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres"; they will make sure, in other words, that God does not have His way, that His will be *not* done.

Dear friends, Jonah is not left to run through running he is. God's grace pursues the fugitive! The storm God sends, signalling judgment and experienced as that, threatening the lives of all on board,

is still grace pursuing the sinner. Not to heed such judgements of God when they occur makes of them the harbinger of the last judgment which shall seal the rejection of grace.

The sailors heed the judgment, at least they try to which is as good as. Blessed are all who like them ask searching questions and seek until they find. For grace to come home, however, pride and self-righteousness must come to light and go down in judgment. ‘Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.’

Must we not look to Christ as our Jonah, though he is *one greater than Jonah*, in whose judgment on the cross our own pride and self-righteousness come to light and go down, and we find grace? Not only must we, but we can! AMEN

God moves in a mysterious way

- 1 God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
and rides upon the storm.
- 2 Deep in unfathomable mines
of never-failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs,
and works His sovereign will.
- 3 Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
the clouds ye so much dread
are big with mercy, and shall break
in blessings on your head.
- 4 Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust Him for His grace;
behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.
- 5 His purposes will ripen fast,
unfolding every hour;
the bud may have a bitter taste,
but sweet will be the flower.
- 6 Blind unbelief is sure to err,
and scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
and He will make it plain.

Words by William Cowper

- time of prayer / intercession -

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen’

The peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you.

AMEN